

VZCZCXYZ0007
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGB #0405/01 0471319
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 161319Z FEB 10 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6639
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

S E C R E T BAGHDAD 000405

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/17/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER INSERTS HIMSELF INTO AUTHORIZATION
OF JOINT SPECIAL OPS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Maliki, through the Office of the Commander in Chief head General Faruq, directed February 12 that the PM must authorize all U.S. combined operations following a February 11/12 U.S.-Iraqi operation in the southern Iraqi province of Maysan. The operation was aimed at disrupting the Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) network, which has been linked to indirect fire (IDF) smuggling and attacks in southern Iraq. The operation was fully coordinated with GOI authorities and in compliance with the Security Agreement. However, it generated significant backlash among Iraqis, particularly in Maysan province, when reports of eight Iraqis killed, including one woman, hit the press. Reacting to the Prime Minister's February 12 directive, Iraqi forces countrywide sought further clarity from the PM's office on the scope of their future combined U.S.-Iraqi operations. USF-I Acting Commanding General (CG) and Charge met with the PM Chief of Staff Tariq Abdullah February 15 to clarify the PM's intent. They raised specifically earlier discussions between Embassy/USF-I and Iraqi senior leadership in which the GOI stated that combined operations involving helicopters and airplanes will require PM approval from now on, but that all other operations could continue as per the Security Agreement. In a second conversation, Tariq Abdullah told Acting CG that the PM had directed a return to normal operations with some caveats on the use of air-to-ground strikes. U.S. Divisions (USD) reported late February 15 that the GOI lifted the combined operations ban for special operations missions for Sunni targets, and expected that the GOI would authorize Shia targets on February 16/17. Embassy and USF-I will continue to press GOI officials on the details but predict a return to normal operations. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S/NF) Iraqi police forces, supported by U.S. Forces, carried out the Maysan operation, known as Steel Curtain, to "degrade the lethal aid smuggling" capabilities of Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), a group with ties to Lebanon's Hezbollah. According to U.S. military sources, the targeted individuals were pivotal members in the KH lethal aid smuggling ring in the Ali ash-Sharqi area in the northwest of Maysan province. Recent surveillance revealed that the movement of weapons and material through this area is possibly directly connected to the recent increase in IDF attacks, including the recently conducted improvised rocket assisted munition (IRAM) attack in southern Iraq. The firefight during operation Steel Curtain began when the insurgents engaged the U.S. and Iraqi forces as they moved into position. The operation resulted in eight Iraqis

killed, including one armed female who was maneuvering on the reconnaissance team, and 22 arrested. (NOTE: The female was pronounced dead on arrival after being evacuated to a local hospital following the mission. END NOTE.)

Iraqi Press Blames U.S. for Loss of Iraqi Lives

- - - - -

13. (SBU) Initial Iraqi press reports described operation Steel Curtain as a unilateral U.S. mission. The reports blamed U.S. forces for killing "ten innocent people" and killing "villagers from one family." Iraqi Vice President Adel Abd al-Mahdi, for example, called publicly for an investigation into the operation, which "cost the lives of innocent civilians" in Maysan province. VP Abd al-Mahdi's advisor told Poloff February 14 that the VP's statement was "just politics," and that Abd al-Mahdi would have contacted the Ambassador and Commanding General directly if he had suspected the U.S. of violating the Security Agreement. On February 13, the military base in Maysan where our PRT is located took seven rockets, but no Americans were injured. In addition, the PRT reported February 12/13 that their local contacts were reluctant to meet them. However, by February 15, they reported that the situation had cooled off and contacts were returning to normal. The Defense Minister spokesman clarified the combined operation for the press, stating "the Iraqi-U.S. troops were fired on by wanted persons, forcing the troops to return fire." U.S. military press releases also addressed the incident, stating that a total of 22 suspected KH terrorists were arrested February 11/12 in a series of combined security operations targeting an Iranian-backed lethal aid smuggling and rocket attack

network operating in rural villages near the Iranian border.

ISF Response Varies as Clarity Trickles Down

- - - - -

14. (S) The initial lack of clarity in PM Maliki's order led to its differing implementation throughout Iraq. In USD-South, the Basrah Operations Commander erred on the side of caution and called off partnered operations with the exception of support to the PRTs. One report from USD-North indicated that there would be no partnered operations with police forces or other MOI forces unless they were approved by PM Maliki. Another USD-North Brigade reported that the directive did not reach their partners and had not had any impact on operations over the past two days. The PRTs in Babil and Diwaniya, which rely on ISF escort, reported that their movements were canceled February 14, but noted the next day that they were able to resume movements. The Anbar Operations Center issued a temporary prohibition, which was then lifted, on all partnered operations, while the Baghdad Operations Center was reinforcing the message that the Prime Minister's directive does not change the standard procedures for U.S.-Iraqi missions in and around Baghdad. Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula Polad commented that they ran one partnered operation February 14/15. However, it was an al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) target that had been approved by the Prime Minister's office. Late on February 15, the GOI notified USF-I that the longstanding approval process for operations involving Sunni insurgent group AQI/Islamic State of Iraq targets in northern/western Iraq had been restored. Shia targets are expected to be authorized within the next day.

15. (S/NF) COMMENT: Prompt follow-up with the Prime Minister's office and Defense Minister has narrowed the scope of these Iraqi restrictions, resulting in what appears will be a manageable way forward for continued joint counterterrorism operations. Senior Embassy and USF-I leadership will press GOI officials, including PM Maliki, but predict a return to normal operations. Meanwhile, in the charged pre-election atmosphere, Maysan provincial authorities and political leaders were quick to condemn the "civilian" casualties. The strongly worded statements against "unilateral" U.S. operations went unchallenged by the

GOI and ISF, which chose not to correct the misinformation for days. The PM is likely highly mindful of the political liability of civilian deaths, particularly a female, shortly before an election. The fallout in the local press underscores the importance of immediately expressing regret for loss of life in strategic communications and press releases following an operation that results in reported "civilian" casualties, while working the operational aspects with the GOI leadership. END COMMENT.
FORD